

CITY OF BELLEVUE
HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION
MINUTES

October 3, 2023
6:00 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
Room 1E-113

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Chair Mansfield, Vice Chair Singh, Commissioners Halsted, Jain, White

COMMISSIONERS REMOTE: Commissioner Piper

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: Commissioner Amirfaiz

STAFF PRESENT: Toni Esparza, Ruth Blaw, Donna Adair, Saada Hilts, Department of Parks & Community Services

COUNCIL LIAISON: Deputy Mayor Nieuwenhuis

POLICE LIAISON: Major Mark Tarantino

GUEST SPEAKERS: Nicholas Merriam, Housing Connector

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

1. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 by Chair Mansfield who presided.

2. ROLL CALL

All Commissioners were present with the exception of Commissioner Amirfaiz.

3. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

September 19, 2023

A motion to approve the minutes was made by Vice Chair Singh. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Halsted and the motion carried unanimously.

4. ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS

Chair Mansfield took a moment to note that in compliance with Washington state public disclosure laws regarding the use of public facilities during elections, no election-related topics could be discussed during oral communications or any other public participation portions of the agenda, including promoting or opposing ballot measures, and supporting or opposing a candidate for election, including oneself. Any speaker discussing topics of such a nature will be asked to stop. Additionally, under Ordinance 6752, the topics about which the public may speak

during a meeting are limited to subject matters related to the city of Bellevue government and within the powers and duties of the Human Services Commission. Additional information about the new rules of decorum governing the conduct of the public during meetings can be found in Ordinance 6752.

Alex Tsimerman referred to the housing forum and noted not having been invited to speak by the Democrat mafia bandita dirty bastards.

Chair Mansfield reminded Alex Tsimerman of the rules against campaigning or speaking for or against ballot measures, and about speaking only on matters pertinent to the work of the Commission.

Alex Tsimerman said the price of housing in Bellevue over the last few years has jumped up.

The Chair reminded Alex Tsimerman of the rules to not speak about his campaign. The chair reminded Alex Tsimerman to only speak on Human Services business, and that his time was up. Alex Tsimerman called the chair an expletive. The Chair informed Alex Tsimerman that his time was expired, that he had to leave, and the Chair gave him a formal verbal warning.

Chair Mansfield reminded Alex Tsimerman that the Human Services Commission has no powers over the price of housing or rent in the city.

Alex Tsimerman left the meeting.

Jennifer Fisher, executive director of Bellevue LifeSpring. The organization was awarded \$55,000 by the Commission for emergency rent support, all of which was expended June 30, preventing 22 households from experiencing homelessness. The households were provided with 45 months of rent support. A total of 77 adults and 43 children were prevented from experiencing eviction and homelessness. To address the entire need would require about \$10 million, but the agency's annual budget is \$4 million, of which \$1 million is spent annually on emergency rent support in support of 350 families. The Commission also provided funding for food and nutrition support in the amount of \$102,350, all of which was spent by the end of August. The investment provided more than 34,000 meals to more than 1000 students during the six weeks of summer break. The program provides Safeway food vouchers for the purchase of food only when school is not in session. So, this ensures that those students get the nutrition that they need when school is not in session. The program gives family the dignity of selecting the food that fits their dietary, cultural and nutritional preferences. To reach the entire need of the 4175 students who are at risk of hunger would require \$1.7 million. Department of Parks and Community Services assistant director Toni Esparza was invited to address the board of directors at a retreat in March and the talk was extremely helpful.

5. COMMUNICATION FROM CITY COUNCIL, COMMUNITY COUNCIL, BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

Deputy Mayor Nieuwenhuis said an assumption meeting on the transportation benefit district was held on September 11. The district was formed in July and the Council may in the future

decide to assume the district as a way to bring in an additional \$3 million to \$10 million per year for maintenance projects around the city.

The Environmental Stewardship Initiative continues to perform strongly. Six new staff members have joined the team. The plan has 78 different actions. Staff have already initiated 25 of them, and they have incorporated 36 of the ongoing operations in addition to fully completing six actions.

The Keep Bellevue Beautiful program addresses graffiti, abandoned shopping carts and litter. To date there have been three volunteering days, and another is coming up. The overall reaction by the public has been very good. In the spring the city will be launching an adopt-a-street program under which people can adopt streets to keep them clean.

At the Council's September 11 meeting, action was taken to fully fund body-worn cameras for the police department. The five-year agreement covers the purchase and maintenance of the cameras. Then at the September 18 meeting the Council addressed the Emergency Water Supply Masterplan. The plan has policies regarding water supply emergencies. The plan will be adopted by the Council at a future meeting.

Deputy Mayor Nieuwenhuis announced that Officer Kealii Akahane recently was awarded the Carnegie Award for taking heroic action to save a 17-year-old from drowning in Phantom Lake on June 6, 2022.

6. STAFF AND COMMISSIONER REPORTS

Department of Parks and Community Services assistant director Toni Esparza took a moment to introduce new Human Services Manager Ruth Blaw. The Commissioners took a moment to introduce themselves as well.

Ruth Blaw noted having previously served the city of Seattle as the manager of the Seattle Conservation Corp, a parks department work training program for homeless adults, after having been the director of Youth Cares Orion Center, a hub for homeless young people.

Toni Esparza reported that the data collection effort that is part of the Human Services Needs Update is nearing completion by the vendor. The update will differ this year in that it will include a human services strategic plan. Over the next few weeks, the vendor will be analyzing the data and looking for themes to be shared with the Commissioners who will be asked for input.

7. PUBLIC HEARING

A. Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) CV2 Funding

Human Services Planner Donna Adair stated that the city, as a passthrough entity, received \$173,748 in CDBG CV2 funds from the Washington State Department of Commerce. The funds are intended to prevent, prepare for or respond to the Coronavirus and they are part of the Cares

Act adopted by Congress in March 2021. The City Council adopted Ordinance 6661 on October 25, 2021, which approved the funding allocations of \$121,624 to BrightSpark, formerly Child Care Resources, to provide child care vouchers to low- and moderate-income Bellevue residents. An additional allocation of \$52,124 was awarded to the YMCA of Greater Seattle to provide contactless food box services to low- and moderate-income Bellevue residents. The YMCA received an additional \$100,000 through CDBG CV3 funding to help with the contactless food box services.

The public hearing is intended to highlight the outputs of the funding allocations as the remaining funds near the end. BrightSpark provided 18 Bellevue families with 1049 days of child care services thus far, and the YMCA has provided 186 residents with 2349 individual meals, and 1682 produce boxes.

A motion to open the public hearing was made by Commissioner Halsted. The motion was seconded by Vice Chair Singh and the motion carried unanimously.

Maggie Heard, family navigation lead for BrightSpark Early Learning Services, noted that the CDBG allocation supported the organization's child care financial assistance program for families living in Bellevue. The program assists families with paying for licensed childcare and typically offers partial assistance paying for childcare expenses. The funding allowed BrightSpark to cover the full costs of seamless child care for families impacted by Covid-19, making licensed childcare accessible for families that would not otherwise have been able to afford it, and in turn it allowed families to pursue and maintain employment and higher education activities. It has also allowed a few families to have their children in care while a parent accessed extended medical care or made plans to flee domestic violence. Over the past two years, the CDBG funding has served 19 children and provided 53 months of child care vouchers. The speaker shared the story of Amanda, a full-time employee and full-time nursing student and mother of two small children, who was initially awarded a partial child care scholarship given that at the time there were two adults and two incomes in the family. Upon becoming a single parent, BrightSpark was able to authorize a higher scholarship rate, allowing Amanda to maintain both employment and studies. Amanda has found a suitable childcare provider who provides care in both languages the child is familiar with and offers a secure livestream that allows Amanda to check in throughout the day. The daughter has started asking to be held and read to much more since starting childcare. Bellevue's CDBG funding has made it possible for Amanda's children to go to the childcare center that Amanda feels is the best fit for the family. The childcare provider does not accept other financial assistance programs and Amanda would not have been able to have the child attend the center without the CDBG funding.

Nicole Lowe, senior director for youth, family and community programs for the YMCA of Greater Seattle, thanked the Commission and the city of Bellevue for providing CDBG CV2 funds to the organization. The funding allowed for serving Bellevue residents through the food access programs. The original grant provided 186 residents with individual meals. Feedback from the recipients also indicated a need for additional produce due to the rising cost of food. The program staff were able to deliver those meals and produce boxes through an amendment to the original allocation agreement. One recipient family let it be known that the meals and

produce boxes were the only thing helping them make it through the week absent any additional money for food. Another family stated that rising food costs had made it necessary to cut items from their food budget, including fresh produce. Produce and other healthy foods often are the first thing families cut from their food budgets. The food boxes contain 21 pounds of produce and the typical family supported has five members.

Absent additional speakers, a motion to close the public hearing was made by Commissioner Halsted. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Jain and the motion carried unanimously.

8. INFORMATION FOR THE COMMISSION – None

9. OLD BUSINESS – None

10. NEW BUSINESS

A. Presentation: Housing Connector Program

Nicholas Merriam, vice president of program and operations for Housing Connector, a tech for good non-profit headquartered in the greater Puget Sound area, thanked city staff and the Commissioners for the invitation to talk about the work in the broader community. Housing Connector is focused on helping folks gain access to housing by using technology. No housing unit should sit vacant. There is a clear housing crisis and a need for more affordable housing. Even so, there are still units that go unoccupied in the community, and Housing Connector seeks to make the best use of all available units. In addition to operating in the Puget Sound area, Housing Connector also operates in Denver, Dallas and later in 2023 in Portland.

It is recognized that it will take a very long time to build out of the housing crisis. There are no overnight solutions. Many clients the organization works with are housing unstable. Some are facing domestic violence issues or are just exiting homelessness. In a competitive market, those folks are often left on the sidelines due to all the barriers beyond just affordability, barriers such as past evictions, bad credit scores or criminal histories. Housing Connector has designed a product and a program to support those who are housing unstable. The program works directly with housing providers who have businesses to run. Fundamental to their businesses is screening criteria. Even where there are affordable units clients might be able to get into with a voucher of guaranteed payment, they may not be able to get through the screening process.

Over the last three and a half years, Housing Connector has housed more than 5400 people across all the markets. Of those, there is an 88 percent first-year completion rate, and 77 percent have remained stably housed for two years. Screening criteria disproportionately affects folks who historically been marginalized, including persons of color.

Housing Connector focuses on solving problems at the property level. Those running properties face financial challenges and challenges regarding customer service with residents. On the demand side, it is really hard for case managers on the non-profit side to find units for clients that might have two past evictions and no credit score. All the inventory amassed by Housing Connector is put on display and made accessible to case managers through a proprietary and

exclusive relationship with Zillow. Everyone then works together to make sure residents stay stably housed for two years.

On the supply side, Housing Connector recruits property owners with a financial package and a customer service package. The property owners are asked to lower their screening criteria in exchange for the risk mitigation tooling Housing Connector has in place. Currently, there are some 800 units across King County that are available for clients to move into. The property partners are provided with up to three months of rent guarantee payments; up to \$5000 damage mitigation; two years of housing stability case management; a single point of contact for property support after move-in; one month of vacancy loss; eviction, mitigation and diversion support; and free leads from the Zillow-hosted platform. Once presented with the package, property owners are asked to lower their barriers in the form of waiving credit scores; accepting past debt owed to a housing provider under \$3000; accepting verifiable income of twice the rent amount; waiving proof of rental history; accepting two evictions occurring within the past three years; and considering criminal history on a case-by-case basis.

Once there is an inventory of units, the focus turns to how to get folks into those units. Housing Connector focuses on working with non-profit service providers who have the clientele and who offer case management. They are provided access and login credentials to an exclusive Zillow marketplace; access to available units with reduced screening criteria; customer support during housing search and leasing; and two years of housing stability support and triage for all clients once they are in their new homes. Non-profits are not asked to pay for the service other than offering case management during the first year; and to engage and collaborate with the stability team when tenancy issues arise.

The Housing Connector product is built into the main Zillow product and provides real-time inventory management using tech in a way others do not. Community partners can view available rentals that have the reduced screening criteria. The cost of getting a resident into housing and staying housed for two years through Housing Connector is \$4000 per household.

Chair Mansfield asked who pays the \$4000. Nicholas Merriam said the funding involves primarily public dollars. Grants are maintained with the King County Housing Authority, King County, Pierce County, the state of Colorado and the city of Denver. There are also private dollars that flow into the mix.

Chair Mansfield asked if Zillow is donating its time and services or if they are charging a fee just as they do to realtors and property managers, and asked if Zillow takes the client information as leads or if the client information is protected. Nicholas Merriam explained that Zillow has been a great partner and have four FTEs that support the Housing Connect product, which Housing Connect does not have to pay for. When it comes to client information, all such information comes through Housing Connect; none of it gets transmitted through Zillow, and all appropriate security measures are in place.

Vice Chair Singh asked about situations where a tenant chooses not to pay rent in line with the state eviction process. In such cases, the landlord takes a big risk. Nicholas Merriam said much of the work of Housing Connect focuses on eviction prevention and eviction avoidance. There is

a mediator on staff who is trained in mutual lease terminations. When irreconcilable differences are faced with resident, a mutual lease termination is often negotiated, as opposed to seeking an eviction. While not ideal, it is a route that gets the resident out and does not leave them with an eviction on their record. There are property owners who choose not to list with Housing Connect, but who are very interested in the organization's cost-effective mediation services.

Commissioner White asked what the next steps are for tenants after the two-year period. Nicholas Merriam allowed not having a lot of data on that given that the organization is only three and a half years old. The data that is available shows tenants gain stability during the two years, often through gaining employment. In some cases, the tenants re-engage with a non-profit and return to a new unit. The eviction rate is quite low, and the two-year completion rate is quite good.

Commissioner Halsted asked about the partners Housing Connector works with. Nicholas Merriam said the organization partners with 102 non-profits in King County. On the Eastside, that list includes Friends of Youth, YouthCare, Catholic Community Services, and the Salvation Army.

Commissioner Piper asked if the 800 units that are currently available have all been vetted by Housing Connector and have property owners who have agreed to reduce the barriers to them. Nicholas Merriam said an active shopper logging into Zillow and clicking on the Housing Connector button will see 800 units that are currently available. The total portfolio of units is closer to 90,000, about 2700 units of which are in Bellevue.

Commissioner White assumed that a presentation and approval is required for condominiums and apartments where there is an HOA. Nicholas Merriam said Housing Connector has expertise in working with large multifamily providers and has a very talented property recruitment staff that has deep industry experience. Within multifamily homes, a property ownership group will often own 75 to 100 properties. When it comes to mom-and-pop entities that generally offer single family homes, achieving scale is very hard. A lot of focus has been put into diving deep in those areas where scale can be achieved, which primarily involves the big property owners.

Chair Mansfield thanked Nicholas Merriam for the presentation.

B. Commissioner Requests to Participate in Future Meetings Remotely

There were no requests made to participate remotely either on November 7 or December 5.

11. CONTINUED ORAL COMMUNICATIONS – None

12. ADJOURNMENT

Chair Mansfield adjourned the meeting at 6:53 p.m.